

14 July 2011

Ms Gail Quinton
Director of Children's Services
Worcestershire County Council
County Hall
Spetchley Road
Worcester
Worcestershire
WR5 2NP

Dear Ms Quinton

Annual unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within Worcestershire County Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the recent unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements within local authority children's services in Worcestershire County Council which was conducted on 15 and 16 June 2011. The inspection was carried out under section 138 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. It will contribute to the annual review of the performance of the authority's children's services, for which Ofsted will award a rating later in the year. I would like to thank all of the staff we met for their assistance in undertaking this inspection.

The inspection sampled the quality and effectiveness of contact, referral and assessment arrangements and their impact on minimising any child abuse and neglect. Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including: electronic case records; supervision files and notes; observation of social workers and senior practitioners undertaking referral and assessment duties; and other information provided by staff and managers. Inspectors also spoke to a range of staff including managers, social workers, other practitioners and administrative staff.

The inspection identified one area of strength and areas of practice that met requirements, with some areas for development.

The area for priority action identified at the previous unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in July 2010, which concerned improving the quality and consistency of management systems and practice and increasing the staffing capacity of the service, has been addressed and there has been satisfactory progress in seven of the eight areas for development identified in that inspection. The inspection of safeguarding and looked after children services undertaken in October 2010 identified six recommendations relating to contact, referral and assessment arrangements and there has been some progress made against all of these recommendations.



From the evidence gathered, the following features of the service were identified:

Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Significant progress has been made to ensure that the overall restructure of the service and the new referral and assessment processes are effective in identifying and managing risk of harm to children and young people. Managers in the duty and assessment teams manage risk of harm robustly to ensure that decision making on referrals and assessments is consistent and that timely action is taken to safeguard children and young people. Social workers report that they have good support and advice from managers about their case work and decision making in child protection.
The service meets the requirements of statutory guidance in the following areas
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Procedures and policies are in place in the duty and assessment teams to ensure that statutory requirements to safeguard children and young people are met. ▪ Social workers' caseloads are manageable and this enables work to be completed in a timely way. This was an area for development at the previous unannounced inspection. ▪ Timescales for the completion of initial and core assessments have improved. Assessments are promptly allocated and work is undertaken by suitably qualified social workers. Senior managers have developed a range of quality audits and case monitoring tools that are beginning to have an impact in promoting practice improvements. This was an area for development at the previous unannounced inspection and at the safeguarding and looked after children inspection. ▪ Revised inter-agency thresholds are in place and are understood by partner agencies. The use of the common assessment framework continues to increase as a preventative approach to provide multi-agency support to children and young people and their families. This was an area for development at the previous unannounced inspection and at the safeguarding and looked after children inspection. ▪ The quality of initial and core assessments seen by inspectors is at least satisfactory, although the degree of analysis contained within the assessments is variable. Most assessments seen demonstrated clear, measurable plans for intervention to safeguard children and young people. This was an area for development at the previous unannounced inspection and at the safeguarding and looked after children inspection. ▪ Children, young people and family members are effectively involved in assessments. Children and young people are seen when appropriate and their

wishes and feelings are taken into account in the formulation of plans.

- Child protection enquiries are timely and carried out by qualified and suitably experienced social workers. Prompt joint action is taken with the police and other agencies when required. This was an area for development at the previous unannounced inspection.
- Out of hours duty arrangements are clear and robust and link well with daytime services to enable a prompt, informed and effective response to safeguarding children and young people.
- The frequency and quality of staff supervision has improved. Staff receive regular supervision and inspectors saw evidence of good quality case discussions that had an impact on improving practice. Supervision decisions and management discussions are routinely entered onto the electronic recording system, which ensures effective information sharing to safeguard children and young people. This was an area for development at the previous unannounced inspection.
- The specialist disabled children team is well resourced and has a qualified, full time, dedicated duty officer to undertake referral and assessment responsibilities. This ensures that children, young people and their families receive a consistent service from known professionals.

Areas for development

- Decision making on contacts received by children's social care services is not robust. Thresholds for receiving a service are not applied consistently and some contacts are being closed without appropriate checks being undertaken to establish if further assessment is required.
- Staff review and development plans are not completed routinely and do not meet the council's own requirements to have up to date development plans in place. Therefore, staff development needs are not regularly reviewed and updated systematically to identify training and development issues and to inform workforce planning.
- Attention to equality and diversity issues is not consistently evident in case files and assessments for children, young people and families. Consequently the impact of these issues on assessment and planning to safeguard children and young people is limited.
- Despite some improvements, record keeping on case files in some teams is not sufficiently up to date. This was an area for development at the previous unannounced inspection.
- Although progress has been made to address the issues identified in the priority action from the previous unannounced inspection and the recommendations made in the safeguarding and looked after children

inspection this needs to be further embedded to ensure children and young people continue to be safeguarded.

The areas for development identified above will be specifically considered in any future inspection of services to safeguard children within your area.

Yours sincerely

Marie McGuinness
Her Majesty's Inspector

Copy: Trish Haines, Chief Executive, Worcestershire County Council
Andrew Spencer, Department for Education